



REACHING CHILDREN THROUGH LIBRARIES —FUTURE ASPECTS

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The culture of a country is known by the literature it produces. India has a rich heritage of literature right from the beginning of civilisation. *Apaurusheyavangmaya* or the literature written by unknown scholars, like the Vedas and the Upanishads were followed by great epics and Puranas. Though mostly oral, this literature and literary pursuit were handed down for generations. But somewhere during the passage of time, love for literature and book culture was lost. And now the excuse of poverty is being given.

It is true that in a developing country like ours, purchasing power is low. Food and clothing take precedence as they are basic needs, and books, especially books for children, are last on the consumers' list.

The question is, is it only the poverty or monetary constraint that stops parents from buying books for children? If it had been so, then throughout India, the situation should have been the same. But in some parts of the country like Bengal, Maharashtra and Kerala, children's literature is surviving better as parents buy books for children. So, it is not a question of money. Parents do buy expensive clothes and toys, spend on VCR, films, restaurants and eats. Then why are they not ready to buy books for children? It is the attitude or question of values and awareness. The survey conducted by the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children had shown that parents earning three to four thousand rupees per month were not ready to spend even 80 paise to one rupee on

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a children's book. Parents do not realise that good books are as essential to the growing up process of a child as good food. Books provide healthy nourishment to their minds, to their psychological and emotional development.

In many cases, parents do not have information about the availability of books. They do not know or have no guidance as to what books are suitable for their children. In developed countries like the USA and the UK, library association and publishers' associations publish bibliographies every year to guide parents and school libraries in buying books for children. But in India, such an attempt was made only once, by the Children's Book Trust.

Knowing this reality, should we allow our children to suffer and not get books? If buying books is difficult for parents, the only remedy left is to reach books to children through libraries — special libraries or special sections in general libraries for children's books.

Libraries are essential to inculcate the reading habit among children. And this habit has to be inculcated from childhood. Once a child takes to reading books, he is booked for life. It would also keep him away from drugs and other addictions.

Let us see what is the present position of libraries in our country, and how far they will be able to cater to the ever increasing number of children.

According to the National Library, Calcutta, the number of public libraries in the country is 25,000, out of which only 500 have children's sections. Then there are 50 children's libraries. The biggest among them is Dr. B. C. Roy Library of the C.B.T. Then comes one Children's Library of Delhi Public Library at Jor Bagh. These 50 libraries include the libraries run by Bal Bhavans in each state. That means, in all, there are 550 public libraries for children. Then the area libraries run by the

dedicated members of the AWIC. Out of 30 area libraries, 25 are in Delhi, one in Ahmedabad, two in Punjab, one in Allahabad and one in Nasik. These libraries are just drops in the ocean if we consider the number of children who need books to read. In India, children between age-group of 4 to 14 constitute 25 per cent of our population of 80 crores. That means, we have to cater to about 20 crore children. And if we include pre-school children, the figures go up still higher. And projection for the next census of 1991, the figure is about 30 crores. It is true that literacy rate is very low and many children have to drop out from school, but we still have to think and satisfy their need for good books. At present, there are 74 lakh schools up to secondary level, and there are 1,364 lakh students in them. They are the children who can read and want to read. Books must be made available to them.

Schools are the best basic institutions which can introduce children to books. And since at least at the primary school level, the teacher's word is sacred to pupils, teachers can and should try to inculcate the reading habit and love for books among them. Each school should provide a good library with an enthusiastic and dedicated librarian. But at present, hardly 10 per cent of the 74 lakh schools have libraries. Only in cities and towns do schools provide library facilities. In these school libraries, there are books, but no care is taken about their selection. Libraries are reluctant to issue books to children for the unwarranted fear of children losing and damaging them. The librarians do not want to take that risk. But if schools can replace laboratory equipment, furniture, stationery and expensive toys in nursery sections, why can they not replace books? Why this step-motherly treatment to books? Or is it the attitude of librarians that does not give children the opportunity to read books?

Books are considered objects of decoration and kept under lock and key. This is the situation even in the public schools.

Therefore, it is all the more necessary that there is a widespread chain of children's libraries on the basis of area libraries run by the AWIC where children can walk down and select books of their choice.

These types of children's libraries have tremendous potential. They can become the catalyst for social change. By organising many other activities at these libraries, they can provide outlets to the hidden talents among children. Painting competitions, story-telling, quiz programmes etc. can be and are being organised at these libraries. In rural and semi-urban areas, they can become small cultural centres where children can be taught traditional crafts and folk music, puppet-making and their manipulation. Involvement of parents in the library movement can bring about an attitudinal change in the parents. For example, at area libraries of the AWIC, initial resistance was turned into enthusiasm.

In rural areas, these libraries would give an opportunity to parents to come into contact with new development and expose them to modern ideas.

The introduction of libraries should not be taken as just a social programme. It can also provide gainful employment to educated girls, especially local girls in towns and cities and also in rural areas if the libraries are made an integral part of children's development programme. Every "Angan Wadi" should have a small children's library stocked with attractive books. The library should be made an essential part of the integrated child development programme. Good books are the best incentives for literacy. Thus, it will utilise the untapped women's power and help them to come into the mainstream of socio-

economic activities of the nation.

Another economic potential of the libraries is that it would create a demand for more books and help the publishing industry, which at present needs a real good boost. In the process, it would also bring some monetary gain to authors and illustrators. But more than the monetary gains, it would give an incentive to creativity both in writing and illustrating. These libraries would also provide feed-back to authors, publishers and illustrators regarding the kind of books children like to read. In short, the children's libraries have an all round socio-economic and cultural potential.

Like any large-scale or widespread project of importance, the children's library project will have to cross many hurdles and face a number of problems. First and foremost, there would be the problem of availability of necessary books. These libraries would need a large number of books. India being a land of many languages, books would be needed in all regional languages and for different age-groups. At present, the print order of children's books in regional languages and even in Hindi does not exceed 3,000 per title. Can publishers cope up with the demand if libraries are opened in all parts of India? Do they have that much money to invest? Would the right type of paper be available at right time and at reasonable price? In other words, problems of publishing will have to be overcome. But I am sure, our publishers are enterprising enough to solve these problems and meet the demand.

The second major problem would be the question of manpower, that is, the librarians who should run these libraries. A kind of orientation or motivation programme, with a little basic training of assessing of books and maintaining records will have to be given to the librarians. This can be done by Government agencies in cooperation

with voluntary organisations like the AWIC which is already doing it on a smaller scale.

As has been said earlier, local women with little education, can very well manage these libraries. There would be no dearth of personnel. The need is to motivate them and provide them with an honorarium.

The third problem could be that of place or building for housing children's libraries. These libraries do not need big massive buildings. Existing community centres, school buildings after school hours, panchayat halls, or even a small corner of a house can be made into a children's library. Books can be stored in a box and opened when children come to the library. In fact, in AWIC area libraries, our dining tables or *aangans* become children's libraries for two hours, twice a week. Where there is dedication and will, a way can be found and is found.

Now comes the crucial and very basic problem. That is, money or finance for this project.

The tendency is to look up to the Government. But should not society also contribute towards the development of children? The Government should help, but total dependence on it is not necessary.

Schools, and by schools I mean not only schools in cities and towns, but in rural areas and "Aangan Wadis," all must have libraries. For this, funds are already there and a little more can be collected by Government through cess like educational cess at Municipal and Gramapanchayat levels. In private schools and Government schools, parents are already paying annual charges to cover all these needs, but funds are not used for the libraries. Parents and teachers' associations should ensure that funds are used to buy books and books are issued to children from the libraries, and that books are replaced like other equipment in the schools.

Special libraries must be opened for those children who have to drop out of the school because of socio-economic constraints and restraints. They could be opened by the socially conscious voluntary organisations like Rotary Club and Lions Club by providing monthly funds for the running of these libraries. Such experiments are done in Bombay, Madras and Pune where voluntary youth organisations are reading out stories and giving the books to street urchins, shoeshine boys or children in the slums. In Delhi's resettlement areas the AWIC has helped to organise Shankar's libraries.

Wherever child labour is employed, i.e., match factories, carpet weaving, etc., it should be made compulsory under Labour Laws for the factory owners to open libraries which would provide incentive to literacy.

Other factory owners can be motivated to open children's libraries in their labour colonies and residential schemes. Wives of industrialists and company executives can very well take the initiative to open these libraries. In Russia, every working place has a library. Therefore, books are published in millions of copies in that country.

It may not be possible for all children to get the books of their choice at the school libraries as the time may be short or the books may not be available. Therefore, there is a need to have public libraries in every locality. These libraries can be opened by residents' associations of every locality by voluntary organisations. Nowadays, multi-storeyed flats are the craze or the in-thing. In these flats cooperative societies or associations are formed to look after the maintenance and other facilities. Library for children should be the important facility provided by them. If they do not have a hall or if no one is volunteering for a place in their flat for this purpose, even a basement or a small place under the

staircase can be converted into a children's library.

Another possibility is to have circulating libraries. There are circulating libraries which undertake home delivery of magazines and nowadays video cassettes. Why not books, especially children's books and magazines? They need this facility most, as they cannot go alone to distant libraries. This is especially the problem with residential areas in suburbs and factory towns. A little box on a bi-cycle or in a mobile van can be used. A list of books can be provided to the members to choose from.

Libraries in mobile vans are the best means to reach children living in far flung areas. Delhi Public Libraries do have such vans. More of these for villages and mofussil towns can strengthen the library movement. Children's sections in them should be given special attention, by keeping a collection of good books in sufficient numbers and an enthusiastic librarian to look after, and motivate and guide children to these books.

Another important area where children need books is hospitals—both private and public. Every hospital has a children's ward. These children need some relaxation to forget their physical pain and discomfort. What could be better than an attractive book? A small shelf or a box of interesting books can be kept in the children's ward. And a social worker or a visitor who goes there can read a book and make the child forget his pain. It is certainly a better way than chatting away and giving a headache to the child patient. The cost can be borne by the hospital or the visitors can present books, just as they take flowers or fruits for a patient. Slowly a good library can be organised.

These are the suggestions for organising nationwide chain of libraries for children. It is not enough to set up a children's lib-

rary. Children should come and make use of them. You cannot force a child to read. But if the atmosphere at the library is conducive and congenial, children do come. Little pictures, posters, even greeting cards pasted on the walls and books arranged invitingly can do the trick. But the most important person is the librarian. He or she must be really interested in children and must be a dedicated person.

A librarian should not feel discouraged if the number of children goes down. She should make an effort to attract them. Reading out stories, story-telling competitions, quizzes, painting competitions can be organised to motivate and keep the interest of children in coming to libraries to read books.

And last but not the least is the cooperation of parents. Parents must be involved with the activities of the library. Get-togethers of parents at the time of competitions, quizzes and prize giving ceremonies not only encourages children but parents too feel proud of the achievements of their children. Their attitude of indifference changes into that of enthusiasm. This is the experience of the librarians of the AWIC libraries.

In other words, society as a whole has a responsibility to organise libraries for children and develop a book culture in the country. It would inculcate the reading habit among children, which would increase their concentration in studies as well. If reading habit is not imbibed would not a book reader with the onslaught of TV, VCR and comics, become an extinct species? And when our nation which at present is culturally vibrant would become a nation of morons and human robots.

It is for us to avoid it. Let us not ask or say what other agencies like the Government or schools should do, but let each one of us think how we can help in providing

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books to children. Let us take up this library movement in the same earnest spirit and with the same dedication as our elders took up the freedom movement. Freeing the mind and spirit through reading books

is as important as political freedom.

Today we make a resolve—

“Let this be our target

Children’s library in each locality
and market.”

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tions which have declared the objective of establishing links between the developed and developing countries are not just hypothetical, but out and out a practical proposition. In India, the need for abundant literature for children has prompted some individuals and voluntary agencies to promote good books and they function amidst financial constraints and limited resources. Strengthening the ties between the developed and developing countries in the field

of children’s book is only an expansion of their objectives in the larger interest of the world community of children. If the developed nations step up the promotional ventures for better books for children, the extended arm of cooperation, particularly from organisations like the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children, will always be there to greet them. Together, they would go side by side, bridging cultural barriers for better international understanding.